CHAPTER 20

The Beautiful and the Global

Petra J. E. M. van Dam

At the Quantocks workshop we tried to identify the difference between *sublime* and (merely) *beautiful*. Peter Coates argued that beautiful alludes to smooth, soft, gentle and mainly visual dimensions. Sublime has connotations of infinity, deity, delightful horror, terrible cliffs and affects all the senses. An agricultural (working) landscape seems closer to simply beautiful, whereas the (American) idea of pristine wilderness is closer to sublime.

We heard about the English Romantic poets, Coleridge and Wordsworth, who explored the Quantocks as the first 'literary landscape' visitors. They saw the Quantock landscape not as a working landscape, but as a painting, as 'picturesque.' We talked about our intuition (derived from the Romantic poets?) that high country is more sublime than lowlands. We discussed the difference between the (high) Quantock Hills and the (low) Somerset Levels, and considered the bigger mountains in the Scottish Highlands and the north of England as opposed to the gentle hills of southern England. Also, we read in Margaret Anderson's articles (our homework) that, statistically, most national parks are situated in areas of higher altitude than AONBs (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). This seems to express the widely-held belief that hilly areas are more beautiful than flat landscapes, and that very high mountains are closer to sublime than lower peaks.

Now here is a thought experiment I would like to put forward: if in our time (as it was in prehistory, according to archaeologist Hazel Riley),[1] the hilly landscapes had been the *agricultural* landscapes, and the flats the inaccessible *wild* marshes, would this have altered our appreciation of beauty? In short, which is more important to qualify for the label sublime: high or wild?

At this point I would like to quote an important father of Romanticism, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was greatly enamoured of the Alps, which was the setting for his best-selling novel, *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761). In his autobiographical work, *Confessions*, he expresses two different appreciations of natural beauty, the root of the differences we discussed between beauty and the sublime:

> Moreover, what I mean by fine scenery must by now be clear. A flat landscape, however beautiful, has never seemed so to my eye. I need rushing streams, rocks, pine trees, dark woods, mountains, rugged tracks to scramble up and down, precipices on either side to fill me with fear.[2]

Rousseau introduces the personal, emotional and physical experience of landscape. That it is difficult, even dangerous, to reach this higher landscape contributes to the greatness of the experience. Emotions of fear enhance the experience. Flat landscapes do not provide these emotions and therefore are not sublime, but, at best, merely beautiful. But apart from that, to me it seems there is also a quality in the landscape which comes from emotions attributed to the landscape, emotions related to speed and dynamics (as in the rushing of the streams) or to natural movements (falling rocks, for example, maybe even avalanches?). I feel that the image of a precipice stands in the border zone; it may act as a connection between the individual and the landscape. For precipices are only dangerous because one imagines one may fall off them. So fear aroused by a precipice is an emotion about the possibility of falling, heightened when one identifies oneself with a falling stone. And where there are falling stones all around (landslide), this might stimulate the imagination further. I like to interpret this text fragment in this way, because I know that fear very well, being a lowlander with lots of experience in highlands.

I continue with a question that follows logically from the previous one, in my opinion: how does our experience with particular landscapes affect our appreciation of and experience with other landscapes? And how did this change over time, or how should we conceive of this in a historical way? Large countries like Great Britain and France contain both highlands and lowlands. My country, the Netherlands, is part of the lowlands of Europe and is so small that it contains only lowlands and some slightly hilly areas, but no highlands whatsoever. Our nearest highlands are the Alps. One finds a surprisingly large number of inhabitants of the lowlands of Europe among Alpine tourists, both Germans and Dutch. I suppose we are all a bit like Rousseau (who was born on the threshold of the Alps, in Geneva, but wrote *Julie* while living near Paris, one of the flattest places in France). We find the Alps sublime and majestic and we appreciate them for the terrific and contrasting landscape experience they provide. We really need to struggle to reach the tops to take in the sublime views. And because we are real lowlanders, this also demands a strong physiological effort: before we can access a real mountain we have to wait a couple of days, after arrival, until our blood has adapted to the thinner air. (That experience has been compromised by the numerous, fossil fuel energized lifts, but that is a different story).

My personal landscape experience was very much influenced by the highlands. I spent long summer holidays in the Alps from age ten. That was beautiful and sublime. In contrast, my own country was only moderately beautiful. It was good enough for a week's cycling tour (a low-budget holiday for a student). Our preference was for the slightly elevated eastern areas, which also contain forests, enclosed fields and old, cut-in country roads with hedges, not unlike the lower

parts of the Quantocks and many other agricultural areas in Britain. Only many decades later did I begin to appreciate the beauty of the flat areas of Holland – the famous polder landscape. I cannot say exactly how this happened, but Jenny Graham's remarks made me think about this. She said it took her a long time to appreciate the landscape beauty of the Somerset Levels, where she now lives. I think it has much to do with the light on the water on one hand, and the graphic characteristics of the (reclaimed) wetlands on the other hand (as expressed in rows of trees lining canals, which seems stronger to me in Holland than in England, as my fellow countryman Jan Oosthoek and I both noticed).[3] It may be a rather abstract beauty, and more for the eye than for the other senses. Perhaps it is for this reason that David Moon feels the appreciation of lowlands are an acquired taste, 'in contrast to the more obvious "beauty" of hills and mountains'.[4]

Moon asked Graham how she made the water in her paintings shiny ('by adding white' was her technical answer!), which suggests that the landscape derives its quality from the effect of light on water. A flat wetland landscape without sun is very dreary; the land becomes as grey as the mists that rise from the waters. By contrast, when the sun reflects in the water, everything takes on a new aspect. The water reflects the sky and the clouds. The 'shine' in the landscape is further enhanced when the sun breaks through dark clouds after rain and uncountable drops refract the often fleeting light in all directions.

Finally, moving up to the present, I want to turn to an issue that Iain Porter, development officer (and formerly acting manager) of the AONB team, raised in his presentation at Fyne Court. He told us that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has developed a set of internationally recognized criteria to categorize the various forms of protected areas across the world. There are six categories in total, arranged in descending order of degree of modification by human action, with Category I divided into two (Ia is a strict nature reserve and Ib is a wilderness area). The Quantock Hills AONB is classified as Category V, which denotes 'a protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value'. (All other protected areas in Britain, including all nature reserves and national parks, fall into this category of multiple use and multi-purpose – even though IUCN Category II is entitled 'National Parks').[5] If we create institutionalized and internationalized definitions of this kind, we have moved away from the intuitive approach to sublime and outstanding beauty developed by Rousseau, Coleridge and Wordsworth. My impression is that the IUCN standards are strongly influenced by the gold standard of 'real wilderness' in places such as North America, Australasia and Africa. Yet what do these standards say about natural landscape and beauty in our time, in more densely populated and heavily industrialized regions such as western Europe? If the reference point for these IUCN standards is the state of the natural environment outside Britain, how are they relevant for the managers of the Quantock Hills? And what does a change of category imply for a protected area? Is British landscape management policy driven more by global benchmarks than local ones?

Notes

1. Hazel Riley, whose book, *The Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2006), is based on archaeological fieldwork, transcription of aerial photographs and architectural research, presented her Quantock work during the second day of the workshop, when we met in the Library at Fyne Court, Broomfield, a National Trust property that houses the headquarters of the AONB Service.
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Angela Scholar (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1782/1789]), p. 168.
3. Jan Oosthoek created and maintained the research network's website, which can be accessed at: http://www.environmentalhistories.net/ (accessed 25/10/14).
4. Comment (4 March 2011) on Paul Warde, 'The Fens and the Quantocks', at: http://www.environmentalhistories.net/?p=332 (accessed 25/10/14).
5. For the IUCN Protected Areas Categories System, see: http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/gpap_home/gpap_quality/gpap_pacategories/ (accessed 25/10/14).

Petra van Dam
mei 2016

Local Places, Global Processes

Histories of Environmental Change in Britain and Beyond

edited by

Peter Coates, David Moon and Paul Warde

WINDgather PRESS